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# Reading an Incomplete Nobel: Goldbatt's translation of Mo Yan's *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out**

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**Abstract**

Mo Yan, one of the most successful contemporary novelists in China, was awarded the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature for the "hallucinatory realism" of his novels. Although Mo Yan considers length, density and difficulty to be hallmarks of the novel, the English version of *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out,* translated by Howard Goldblatt, has been abridged and simplified. This article observes three kinds of deletions – characters' voices, cultural memories and aesthetic description – and focuses particularly on the deletion of characters' voices as the most significant kind of omission. The article then argues that the voices of animals and of "Mo Yan" (as a character in the novel) play a non-trivial role in revealing the author's literary and political stance and thus their deletion compromises the reader's interpretation of Mo Yan's literary work.

Mo Yan is arguably the most successful contemporary novelist in China. He won the coveted Mao Dun Literature Prize in 2011 for his successful, innovative and influential novel, *Frogs*. Thanks to Howard Goldblatt's translations into English for over three decades now, Mo Yan also enjoys a well-deserved reputation as one of the most important Asian novelists in the world literary panorama. The Nobel citation described Mo Yan as a novelist "who with hallucinatory realism merges folk tales, history and the contemporary". *Red Sorghum*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and *Sandalwood Death* are among his best known early novels, and *Red Sorghum* provided the basis for a very successful film which opened up the new contemporary China to the rest of the world. His more recent and very successful novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* undoubtedly contributed to the awarding of the Nobel Prize in 2012, and it is Goldblatt's translation of this novel that this article will focus on. Some believe that the quality of Goldblatt's translations has played an important role in making Mo Yan such a well-known literary figure on the world stage. Other critics and commentators, however, believe that it is the charm of the novels themselves that has won popularity among Western audiences; Goldblatt himself has expressed this view in several interviews (for example, Liu) as has the prominent translation critic Xu Jun (Xu), among others.

Naturally, praise for the translator is especially lavish among Chinese critics; Zhu

Zhenwu, for example, has praised Goldblatt's translation of *Life and Death…* as "absolutely faithful to the original novel" (quoted in Jiang, my translation). But in the wake of the celebration and applause few have mentioned the translator's filtering role in this "creative" but shortened English version. According to Goldblatt, "many of the omissions are made by the publishing company" (quoted in Luo, my translation). Certainly, the translated book is very successful; words and phrases are cleverly transferred and sentences are beautifully rhythmic, but Western readers, most of whom do not read Chinese, may not be aware that what they are reading has been significantly abridged and supplemented.[1]

Regrettably, then, the translation may fall somewhat short of the high expectations of those readers who can read Chinese and who would have a more in-depth understanding of Mo Yan's novels. Some readers may well feel that the translation does not capture the full complexity of the novel and therefore falls short in its duty to represent to global readers the achievements of contemporary Chinese culture. In his preface to the Chinese original (which is missing from the translated version) Mo Yan writes that "length, density and difficulty are hallmarks of the novel, and the dignity of such a great literary genre relies on these features of the novel" (1, my translation). In the light of this philosophy of literature, one may well wonder what Mo Yan might think of the shorter and somewhat simplified English version – even though we know that he has placed a lot of trust in his translator (Fan and Huang).

More specifically, there are at least three types of omission in Goldblatt's translation. The first concerns a reduction in the range of narrative voices. The main deletions are narrations by the characters Pig, Dog and "Mo Yan", with the largest omission being in Chapter 28 (295), where seven pages (5,000 Chinese characters or about 3,125 English words) of Pig's and "Mo Yan's" voices are deleted. Other examples are found in Chapter 27 where Pig describes his view of Diao Xiaosan (286) and in Chapter 33 where Pig recalls an apricot tree (344). Altogether there are about 20,000 Chinese characters of this kind omitted.

The second type of omission refers to culturally shared memories. Among this kind of omission we find, for example, a scene describing a Chinese highway in the 1980s which is missing from Chapter 38 (394), and in Chapter 44 (425) there is a scene describing a lane with bicycles in the 1990s which has been omitted from the English version. Such scenes are probably meant to remind Chinese readers of the daily traffic jams in twenty-first-century China. There is also the gently mocking "Red chili sauce" scene in Chapter 45 (429), in which the brand name and the vulgar slogan on the advertising billboard imply cheap, backyard-made, low quality products and bring to mind the beginnings of commercialization in China in the 1990s. Under this category of omission, a total of 7,000 characters are deleted.

The third type of deletion encompasses literary-aesthetic descriptions. In Chapter 32 (340), there should be highly imaginative, romantic and magical scenes of fish in pursuit of the moon, alluding to the magnetic leadership of Mao Zedong – a good example of Mo Yan's "hallucinatory realism" – but all this disappears. Also missing, from Chapter 33 (345), is a lavish and characteristically "Chinese" description of a strip of sand emerging from the river, trees along the riverbank and an indifferent moon shining over the landscape. The omitted description amounts to 4,000 characters. Other minor deletions include Chinese idioms, cultural

[1] For an instance of the latter, one paragraph (175 words) is added in Chapter 52 in the English translation (488-9). In this paragraph a story is introduced to address Lan Jiefang and Pang Chunmiao's fugitive life in Xi'an: they worked in a sweatshop until it was burned down killing many young girls.

allusions and pop songs. Although all types of omission deserve attention, the remainder of this paper will be devoted to the first of the three major types, that is, the omission of narrative voices. This type of omission occurs most frequently and is arguably the most significant type. Focusing on the reduction of narrative voices will highlight their significance for an unimpeded interpretation of the novel as a whole.

*Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* tells a contemporary story of the People's Republic of China from 1950 to 2000 through the metaphorical framework of the Buddhist idea of the six paths of reincarnation: a Buddhist concept according to which each living creature, if not reaching *monksa* (that is, if they have not been set free), suffers six cycles of death and rebirth. Ximen Nao, a landlord executed for his "bourgeois sins", goes through a series of reincarnations as a donkey, an ox, a pig, a dog, a monkey and, finally, a human child. Along the way three narrators' voices are interwoven: Big-head (the human child), an almost omniscient character possessing the cumulative memories of Ximen Nao's previous incarnations, is the main narrator who speaks from the perspective of each incarnation (donkey, ox, pig, dog monkey and human child); Lan Jiefang, a commoner whose understanding of the world is limited by his ordinary perspective; and "Mo Yan", a writer and "literati" who pops up from time to time like a clown to say something plausible yet paradoxical and who is clearly meant to be mocked. These three voices converse throughout the story. This experimental technique and complex narrative structure constitute an important element of the novel, reflecting Mo Yan's philosophy of "dense ideas" （密集的思想）and his view that "a good novel should contain very diverse thoughts; within the novel diverse thoughts should conflict, fight and struggle" (5, my translation).

The different voices of these characters compose an intricate, polyphonic kaleidoscope, creating a fictional world that is actually more like a multi-dimensional universe. However, in Goldblatt's version the voices of Pig and Dog (the monkey's role is small in the original Chinese version) are deliberately reduced. This is probably due to the consideration that Western readers may be more interested in Chinese contemporary historical and political events rather than "the animal world". One reader's review on the Amazon website explicitly makes this point and comments:

> Another critique would be that Mo Yan focused too heavily on the animal world. Though these are symbolic of what was going on in China at the time (the ox symbolizing the overworked collectives, the Pig King compared to Mao), the book was still light on what political changes or policies were actually being instituted that was [*sic*] causing the township so many problems. After finishing I didn't know that much more about the Cultural Revolution, other than that the youth replaced the old guard, and I wish he spent more time on the suffering the peasants had to endure during the Great Leap Forward, which caused millions upon millions of deaths. Never thought I would say it, but I was actually hoping for more on Chinese agrarian land policies.
>
> (Profane, www.amazon.com)

Common readers may wish, through the novel, to understand not only the traumas of contemporary China, but also the literary world. For instance Freeman, in *The Boston Globe*, asks whether there is "an abattoir so lethal as Chinese history" and characterizes Mo Yan as

one of the "giants of the novel who have addressed this ocean of death". Other commentators, such as English translator Nicky Harman, claim that the interest of Western editors in the Chinese Cultural Revolution "is really past" (quoted in Li, "Translation of Contemporary Chinese Literature"), yet it would appear that such assumptions are still influencing the choice of passages to omit from Mo Yan's novel in translation. Goldblatt himself remarked, "We have a rather pessimistic view (on the taste of Western readers): as long as the works show dissatisfaction or criticism of the government, they will be liked and enjoyed by American readers; once the works praise reality, they feel uninterested in them" (quoted in Li, "Goldblatt: Next Step", my translation). Perhaps to align with the mindset of English-speaking readers, especially their curiosity about major political events in China such as the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, the translation has abridged content that might be considered unrelated to the major plot developments. This is especially the case towards the final part of the novel, when the narration approaches the time after Deng Xiaoping's Open Policy (1979) when political events play a far less important role. In this section of the novel the animals are less and less likely to participate in human activities.

A significant example of such manipulation comes from Chapter 41, *Lan Jiefang Feigns Affection for His Wife / Dog Four Watches over a Student* (405-6) where approximately 2,500 Chinese words of narration by Dog Four are deleted. In this paragraph, quite a number of odd and humorous things happen in the dog's world to parallel, or to indirectly mock, human society of the 1990s. In this part of the novel, Dog persistently sniffs out Pang Chunmiao, Lan Jiefang's secret lover; Dog leads a meeting of the entire dog community; and Dog is offered delicacies to eat because of his owner's status as a government official. Any claim that the purely animal activity has nothing to do with the development of the main ideas of the novel, is surely mistaken. Mo Yan wants to show that an animal-like state, free of any human memory of hatred is the ideal, ultimate state of serenity. Memory loss is an important theme in this novel, as may be seen at the end of Part Four when Dog dies and goes to see Lord Yama, who is the authority in control of all suffering, and of life and death. In Chapter 53, *As Death Nears, Charity and Enmity Vanish / A Dog Dies, but the Wheel of Life Rolls on,* the following dialogue between Lord Yama and Dog takes place:

> He [Yama] said:
>
> "Ximen Nao, I know everything about you. Does hatred still reside in your heart?"
>
> I [Dog] hesitated momentarily before shaking my head.
>
> "There are too many, far too many, people in the world in whose hearts hatred resides," Lord Yama said sorrowfully. "We are unwilling to allow spirits who harbor hatred to be reborn as humans. Unavoidably, some do slip through the net."
>
> "My hatred is all gone, Great Lord!"
>
> "No, I can see in your eyes that traces of it remain," Lord Yama said, "so I will send you back once more as a member of the animal kingdom. This time, however, you will be reborn as a higher species, one closer to man, a monkey, if you must know, and only for a short time – two years. I hope that during those two years you will be able to purge your heart of hatred. When you do that, you will have earned the right to return to the realm of humans."
>
> (*Life and Death* 510)

As Ximen Nao turns each time into a different animal, his perspective as a human becomes less and less pervasive and the animals' monologues increase in frequency and even in length. Human memories are replaced by the animals' absolutely innocent and unsophisticated narrations. The narrations of Pig and Dog, compared to those of the donkey and the ox in the previous chapters, contain far fewer thoughts of taking revenge on the cruel people who had once oppressed, teased or bullied Ximen Nao and his family. By doing this, Mo Yan tries to show that the passage of time and the cycles of reincarnation can obliterate the hatred that was once deep-seated in human society.

In parallel with Chinese classical fiction, such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* for instance, where prosperous, important families end up as commoners, in *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* Mo Yan utilizes the Buddhist understanding of the world in which "everything cycles like a wheel" (世事轮回) (Li, "Big I and Loud Voice", my translation) and history, likewise, abides by the traditional Buddhist wisdom that "a long time of separation ends in reunion; a long time of reunion ends in separation" (分久必合，合久必分). So love and hatred in the human world, the loudness and arrogance of historical movements, will turn into serenity once all the necessary cycles are experienced; as the last sentence of the story in Book IV of the novel significantly puts it: "Everything that comes from the earth shall return to it" (511). However, the deletion from the English version of such seemingly irrelevant details voiced and enacted by the animal characters, in order to pursue a more compact "human story", appears to discount this important underlying thread. This may prevent readers from discovering the messages that the animal characters are meant to convey.

Curiously enough, it is not only the voices of the animal characters that are stifled; the story of "Mo Yan" the literati representative also receives similar treatment in the English translation. At least eight passages (from pages 246, 279, 323, 340, 352, 400, 409, 410) containing approximately 6,000 Chinese characters, or about 3,750 English words voiced by or about the character of "Mo Yan" are missing from the English translation. "Mo Yan", whose name coincides with that of Mo Yan the author of the book, is a fictional character. He is a prototypical representation of the nosy Chinese literati who with only a little more knowledge than an ordinary Chinese person loves making pronouncements, but only manages to make things worse. The author warns, tongue in cheek, that his word should not be taken seriously. For instance in Chapter 28:

> According to Mo Yan, as the leaders of the Ximen Village Production Brigade were bemoaning their anticipated fate, feeling utterly helpless, he entered the scene with a plan. But it would be a mistake to take him at his word, since his stories are filled with foggy details and speculation, and should be used for reference only.
>
> (*Life and Death* 294)

However, that words should not be believed or taken seriously does not mean they should be obliterated.

Deletions from the story of "Mo Yan's" character are of two kinds. The first kind of deletion is about "Mo Yan's" novels. For instance in Chapters 28 (295) and 26 (279), details of two books written by "Mo Yan" have been deleted: *Popping up and Jumping onto the Moon*

and *Tales of Pig-Raising* (my translation). The second kind is the descriptions of "Mo Yan's" personality. For example, in Chapter 24 (246), Pig claims that he has learned a lot about the modern world from the very knowledgeable "Mo Yan"; in Chapter 32 (340) Pig mentions the conversation between Lan Jiefang and "Mo Yan", in which they discuss the morality of writing a novel about pig-raising.

"Mo Yan", the character in the novel *Life and Death are Wearing me Out,* is an imaginative and creative man whose disparate, idiosyncratic ideas are constantly laughed at by other people. Mo Yan always uses the phrase "'Mo Yan' the small man" ("莫言那小子", my translation); to call this clownish literati a "small man" ("那小子") adds a tone of scorn and self-effacement. This self-ridicule, like "屌丝" (*diao si*, more recent Chinese slang to mean "loser"), is a very common way to deconstruct embarrassing situations (Li, "The Postmodernism Discourse Perspective"), thus dissolving real dilemmas. So through seemingly disparate, paradoxical or mocking language, Mo Yan is in fact deconstructing the language and trying to hide his real intention of political silence. It is possible that including too much of this character's illogical, apparently trivial and sometimes repetitive accounts in the novel might indeed wear English readers out. On the other hand, reducing the self-ridiculing story of "Mo Yan" may compromise the reader's understanding of the complexity of the writer's literary pursuits and political stance. Rather than totally avoiding any mention of the atrocities of the regime (Saval), Mo Yan has made mention of the disasters that have occurred under the folly of political hegemony, although he would soon after awkwardly joke or recriminate himself about what he was saying in his characteristic disconnected, contradictory "jumble of words" (Sun). As can be imagined, when writers ridicule themselves in their own works, they also reveal an acute critical awareness of their own situation. Mo Yan, likewise, ridicules his fictional "Mo Yan's" novel *Tales of Pig-Raising* to deconstruct the ideological dilemma facing Chinese writers in the 1970s:

> I [the Pig] remember that you [Lan Jiefang] had tried to persuade him ["Mo Yan"] to write about something great and noble such as love, friendship, flowers, or pine-trees. But why bother writing about pig-raising? Do pigs have anything to do with "nobility"?[2]
>
> (生死疲劳 319, my translation)

This part is deleted from Chapter 32 in the English version (340). While the real Mo Yan's own judgment on "nobility" is unknown, such seemingly paradoxical mocking belies an underlying stance, whereby the author realizes the ridicule but, at the same time, he does not wish to respond to confrontations directly and openly. Actually, such ambiguity and nuance is familiar to Chinese readers. It is found, for instance, in Chinese philosophy in the Daoist "doctrine of means", and has a well established place in Chinese literary tradition. Tsao Hsueh-Chin[3] (1715-1763), one of Mo Yan's favorite writers, in *A Dream of Red Mansions,* refused to pass judgment on whether his words are true:

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[2] 我记得你当时劝他写点高尚的事，譬如写写爱情，写写友谊，写写花朵，写写青松，写养猪干什么？猪，能跟"伟大"二字联系上吗？

[3] This author's name is also spelt as Cao Xueqin in Pinyin.

> Pages full of fantastic talk
> Penned with bitter tears;
> All men call the author mad,
> None his message hears.[4]
> (Tsao and Kao 6)

Similarly, Mo Yan has "great fun with the craziness but leaves out the disaster" (Links), although some of the suffering can still be traced in the words of self-mocking in the Chinese version (absent from the English version). The deletion of self-effacement from the English version, however, excludes the reader from interpreting the writer's choice to remain politically silent, although the Western reader may be more accustomed to writers having a more outspoken stance. Some critics, such as the well known Chinese writer Yu Jie and the artist Ai Weiwei (quoted in News 24), or the internationally renowned Salman Rushdie (quoted in Daley), expect Mo Yan to be sympathetic to dissidents protesting against a repressive Chinese government, and in the end they are disappointed by his silence on political issues. In contrast, it could be argued that a careful reading of the integral, uncut work would reveal that the author's opinions are clearly laid out in the novel such that some political movements are cruel, but the author does not openly criticize the political turns of history, which are seen as the fate of the nation. The author's desire is, instead, to wash away painful memories and hatred with the passage of time or through reincarnation. As for his political attitude, Mo Yan has said publicly that "some may want to shout on the street, but we should tolerate those who hide in their rooms and use literature to voice their opinions" (quoted in Grossman). The words of the character "Mo Yan", deliberately leading the topic astray, are then not simply the incongruous and illogical words of a crazy daydreamer; instead they illuminate the writer's "nuanced, even contradictory" but nevertheless "principled and heartfelt" literary style (Knight, 80).

Not only is the political and literary stance of the author obscured and hidden, but even facts become blurred, more or less inadvertently, by the incompleteness of the translated text. In the stream of consciousness passages where animal voices intermingle with "Mo Yan's", "facts" are ambiguous not just about Chinese society but also Western countries. The following example, which should have been in Chapter 24, *Brigade Members Light a Bonfire to Celebrate Good News / Pig King Steals Knowledge and Listens to Fine Words* (246), will be new to Western readers who might think Mo Yan never makes fun of the West. The 884 characters excluded from the English translation, read as follows:

> I [Pig] know [from "Mo Yan's" reading *Reference News*] that American astronauts landed on the moon with Apollo 17. The astronauts conducted scientific research on the moon, collected rocks, planted there an American flag, and then peed a big load of good urine. Because the gravity of the moon is very weak, this urine splashed and floated around like yellow cherries.[5]
>
> (生死疲劳 220, my translation)

[4] 满纸荒唐言，一把辛酸泪！都言作者痴，谁解其中味？

[5] 我还知道美国宇航员乘坐"阿波罗 17 号"飞船登上了月球，宇航员在月球进行了科学考察，采集了大量岩石标本，插上美国国旗，然后撒了一泡很大的尿，因为月球的引力很小，那些尿液，像黄色的樱桃一样飞溅起来。

If one could fathom Mo Yan's attitudes to modern Chinese history, then it would also be possible to perceive his attitude to Western development from deleted passages such as the one just cited. Readers may have very diverse individual experiences in reading. However, what I would like to point out is that this sort of omission may foster unwarranted speculation about the author's political opinions. In any case it is hard to discern whether it is ideological identity that prompts the deletion, or whether it is the desire not to rub against the ideological identity of the reader. But ultimately this translation practice distracts attention from the author's narrative techniques, such as his imaginative blending of realism with myth; it also obscures a fuller understanding of his political views. It is quite clear then that deletions suppress a substantial interpretation of possible worlds, and simplify the overall narrative architecture, preventing readers from uncovering ideas about, among other things, memory and the significance of reincarnation. Thus we reach a similar conclusion to the German sinologist Wolfgang Kubin who, in an interview published in the *Qingdao Daily* (Zhao), went as far as saying that Mo Yan's English novels should have two authors, presumably not just because it is Howard Goldblatt who has helped Mo Yan onto the Nobel prize-winning platform, but also because it is the translator's simplified, rewritten version that fits the ideologies and expectations of Western readers.

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